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Shifting representations of Aboriginality in Australian cinema : Re-presenting from an anti-colonial perspective

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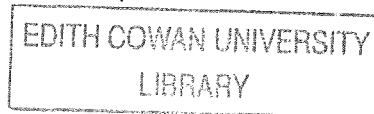
**SHIFTING REPRESENTATIONS OF ABORIGINALITY IN
AUSTRALIAN CINEMA: RE-PRESENTING FROM
AN ANTI-COLONIAL PERSPECTIVE**

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Bachelor of Communications (Film & Video)
with Honours**

**This thesis is presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Communications**

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Edith Cowan University**

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

Recently there has been a significant shift in the way that Aboriginal people are being represented in Australian cinema. Some would argue that the social and political movements that have occurred since the 1960s through until today have had a significant effect and in turn have produced a third wave of Australian cinema. Concurrently with this process, there have been a number of Indigenous politicians, academics and filmmakers who have actively been striving to gain better resources and opportunities for Indigenous filmmakers to be able to tell their stories. A combination of these two projects has seen a shift in the representation of Aboriginal people: from representations produced by non-Aboriginal filmmakers, to representations that are developed and controlled by Aboriginal people and filmmakers. This thesis argues that through self-representation and input by Aboriginal people within films about Aboriginal people, narratives have shifted to place Aboriginal people and experiences at the centre of these stories.

This shift is examined in terms of an anti-colonialist approach. This approach is one which tells Indigenous stories and reasserts the centrality of the Aboriginal experience, and is opposed to colonial and post-colonial approaches. Although anti-colonialism does not have a wide literature base, this thesis has used the work of Professor Marcia Langton and Linda Tuhiwai Smith to explore and develop further this concept. The concept of anti-colonialism has been applied to a number of Indigenous films that have been released for Australian cinema, and which have shown evidence of a discursive shift in discourses surrounding Aboriginality. I have also endeavoured to show that self-representation is vitally important to developing an anti-colonialist approach towards Aboriginality which reasserts the centrality of the Aboriginal experience.

To explore the concept of anti-colonialism, this thesis examines and compares films from 1971 (*Walkabout* – Nicolas Roeg) to 2005 (*The Proposition* – John Hillcoat). The thesis explores the concepts of colonialism and post-colonialism in an effort to place the earlier films within context of their times. These films are broken down into two categories. The first category examines a selection of films starring the Indigenous actor, David Gulpilil. The second category examines three films directed by Aboriginal filmmakers – Rachel Perkins and Ivan Sen.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education.
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
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Thank you to Mum, Dad and Tammy for my cultural upbringing, respect, appreciation and curiosity...I come from an amazing and diverse family. Thank you to Michelle McMerrin and Panizza Allmark for the most encouraging start to academia that a student could have, and especially to Michelle for your support and friendship. And thank you to Mardie O'Sullivan, Lelia Green, Bruce Campbell and Leon Marvell for your input and support. Thank you to Professor Marcia Langton for taking the time to talk to me and re-evaluate my approach. Lastly, thank you to Bethany Andersson...without you, I could not have achieved half of what I had hoped; and you have made me double that.

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INTRODUCTION

The underlying theme of this study is the concept of “anti-colonialism”, which is an area on which there is limited literature. I am exploring anti-colonialist representations of Aboriginality in Australian cinema and my interest in this area stems from my Aboriginal heritage (I am a descendant of the Nygkina¹ people) and my undergraduate studies in Film and Video. The aim of this research is to contribute to an understanding of cultural representation and issues of image and dialogue about Aboriginal people. By continuing to build and add to the body of knowledge surrounding Aboriginality/Indigeneity in Australian Cinema, there will be a wider understanding by the audience of Indigenous art and literature, and the aesthetic and cultural values of Aboriginal film and video production (Langton, 2003, p. 124). Also, I hope this study offers a contribution to the reappraisal of our historical acceptance of what audiences construed as the facts of Aboriginality, and become cognisant of how much influence Australian film has within Australian society in regard to our Aboriginal history and knowledge of Aboriginal people.

However, before commencing, I wish to draw to your attention an issue that I am still unsure on how to deal with – the use of the terms Indigenous and Aboriginal. Indigenous as a collective group is a term that emerged in the 1970s and “internationalises the experiences, the issues and the struggles of some of the world’s colonised peoples” (Smith, 2001, p. 7). The term Aboriginal is a highly contested and heavily defined term, with counts of up to 67 definitions (Langton, 1993, p. 28). It often refers to characterisations. There is no right or wrong use of either term; however throughout this thesis the two terms are often exchanged. Generally, the term Indigenous has been used in a broader sense and encapsulates Indigenous peoples throughout the world, Australian Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. The term Aboriginal has been used in reference to issues and/or films within Australia, and refers to the original inhabitants of this land. This is not to exclude any other Indigenous people to this country.

¹ The spelling of Nygkina has several variations including Njiena (valid variant), Nigena, Njigina, Nyikina, Nyigina, Nyi-gini, Njikini (Tindale, 2005).

CHAPTER 1

DECOLONISING REPRESENTATIONS

Representation is important as a concept because it gives the impression of 'the truth' (Smith, 2001, p. 35).

Throughout the world Indigenous peoples have been reclaiming, revitalising and reconstituting Indigenous cultures and languages (Smith, 2001, p. 142) to redress the historical imbalances and imposed silences of imperialism/colonialism (Kleinert & Neale, 2000a, p. vi). Globally, Indigenous peoples experience a collective memory of imperialism, and challenge the hurt and destruction of imperialism through many varied avenues of reconciliation (Smith, 2001, p. 19). This process, also known as *self-determination*, has allowed Indigenous peoples to keep their cultural traditions alive, which colonialism has tried to extinguish. Some of these avenues of reconciliation include political challenges, the fight for cultural independence, story-telling and filmmaking, which all lead to a process of *decolonisation*. Stephen Muecke describes decolonisation as the “rethinking of [colonial] cultural and industrial ideas” (Muecke, 1992, p. 164). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2001) describes decolonisation as a “knowingness of the colonizer” and a recovery of ourselves, an analysis of colonialism, and a struggle for self-determination” (p. 7). This can also be referred to as anti-colonialism.

In Australia, the process of self-determination for Indigenous people has been pertinent for over the last four decades with a public political struggle for equal opportunities and recognition. Indigenous Australians have continued to maintain a right to self-determination (Kleinert & Neale, 2000a, p. v). The process of self-determination has included events like Aboriginal groups in the 1960s challenging the courts and governments for land rights (Smith, 2001, p. 109). In 1967, a Federal referendum was held to determine whether two references in the Australian Constitution, which discriminated against Aboriginal people, should be removed (*Fact sheet 150: The 1967 referendum*, 2006). This was considered by many to be a fundamental movement for political change within Indigenous affairs (*ibid.*) and attention was drawn to the discriminatory laws imposed upon Aboriginal people. Even though this did little for Aboriginal rights, white Australia was beginning to be made

aware of the economic and social disadvantages that existed within Aboriginal populations (Attwood in Kleinert & Neale, 2000a, p. 685).

Following on from this, in 1972 a group of Aboriginal activists set up a Tent Embassy in front of Parliament House to protest against the government's announcement of a continued commitment to assimilation and rejection of land right claims (Kleinert & Neale, 2000a, p. 712). Ten years later, Eddie Koiki Mabo, from the Torres Strait Islands, commenced a land right claim in the High Court of Australia claiming "native title" to the Murray Islands – his home. The indigenous peoples of the Torres Strait Islands set out to prove that they had "maintained a system of laws, customs, traditions and practices...concerning ownership of, and dealings with, land, seas, seabeds and reefs" (*Mabo and another v. the state of Queensland and another* (1989) 166 CLR 186 F.C. 88/062, 1988). The High Court challenge took a further ten years and finally in 1992 a monumental decision was handed down by the Australian High Court that dispelled the colonial view that prior to 1788 Australia was *terra nullius* – land belonging to no-one – despite the existence of Indigenous populations (Gregory, 1992, p. 157).

Australia experienced a number of other agitations during the 1990s – the campaign for an Australian republic; the development of a national program for Aboriginal reconciliation; and the development of international policy promoting closer economic and social ties with Asia – and Aboriginal Australia was at the public forefront of many of these campaigns (Anderson in Kleinert & Neale, 2000a, p. 435). In 2000, approximately 150,000 people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in a historic display of support for reconciliation (McCallum, 2003). Australia experienced a social and political change as Indigenous Australia was going through a process of self-determination.

These movements, and many others in Australia from the 1970s through to today, have had a profound effect on a range of areas surrounding Indigenous issues, but none more so than Indigenous arts and culture. The term Indigenous art comprises forms such as art, film, television, theatre, music, literature and performance. Australia's Indigenous people use art as a way to engage in dialogue with colonial Australia and to reaffirm their autonomous concerns (Kleinert & Neale, 2000a, p. vii).

Maryrose Casey (2004) discusses Indigenous theatre and how there has been a “transition from Indigenous Australians as object to Indigenous Australians as subject...stories were being told from a different perspective with a different purpose” (Casey, 2004, p. xiv). This transition was also evident in Australian cinema and her description can easily be translated to Indigenous film – that in Australian cinema there has been a transition from Indigenous Australians as objects to Indigenous Australians as subjects. Stories in Australian cinema about Aboriginal people are being told from a different perspective with a different purpose. The transition in perspective also developed a viewpoint that has allowed a shift away from general stereotypes and myths about Aboriginal people.

In an interview, Professor Marcia Langton, points out that Indigenous peoples are now seeing a “much more interesting way of telling an anti-colonial [story]; giving an anti-colonial message by re-telling a colonial story...[and that] artists tell the story better than theorists and politicians do” (Langton, 2005). Telling Indigenous stories through film gained popularity in the early 1980s as Indigenous Australians gained control in self-representing identity in a multicultural Australia (Kleinert & Neale, 2000b, p. 300).

In 1992, the Australian Film Commission (AFC) commissioned a report, which was titled *Promoting Indigenous Involvement in the Film and Television Industry*, prepared by Shirley McPherson and Michael Pope. One of the recommendations of the report was the setting up of an Aboriginal program within the AFC, to develop strategies to pro-actively engage Indigenous Australians in the film and television industry (*The Indigenous Branch: Australian Film Commission*, 2005). Also in 1992, Professor Marcia Langton was commissioned to write an essay for the AFC with a view to “establishing policies and guidelines for the funding of future Aboriginal film projects” (Muecke, 1993, p. 248). Langton reflected on these reports saying that a “young crop of new filmmakers came after the AFC revised its policy... [and the] Australian Film Commission [developed] policy, funding and support for Indigenous filmmakers” (Langton, 2005). This policy added to the growing interest in Aboriginal film seen in the 1980s.

Langton’s essay addressed the need for Aboriginal people to control the means of production in film and reaffirmed that Aboriginal people need to make our own self-

representations. It was and is necessary to have an Aboriginal theoretical point-of-view, especially considering the extraordinary amount of time and resources that Aboriginal people devote to the arts (Langton, 1993, p. 9-10). Langton does acknowledge that simply being Aboriginal does not necessarily mean that you will make better films about Aboriginal people (p. 27). However, by developing a body of knowledge about Aboriginality/Indigeneity in Australian cinema, Langton has been able to play a part in contributing to a resource that is developing a wider knowledge of Indigenous art and literature. Now both Indigenous and non-Indigenous filmmakers have a greater understanding of, respect for and access to the aesthetic and cultural values of Aboriginal film and video production (Langton, 1993, p. 124).

Defining what an Aboriginal film is can be a complicated process. Can a film directed by a non-Aboriginal filmmaker about Aboriginal issues be called an Aboriginal film? Does a film directed by an Aboriginal filmmaker about non-Aboriginal issues become an Aboriginal film? These are complicated questions with complex answers and have been considered in studies by researchers such as Marcia Langton and Terrence Turner (Kleinert & Neale, 2000a, p. 297). However, in the context of this thesis, Aboriginal film refers to the films with an Aboriginal theme woven through the narrative. A film with an Aboriginal theme could refer to the stolen generations, Aboriginal culture, or Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations. The films to be discussed in this study explore characters motivated by Australian and Aboriginal lifestyles, politics and symbolic culture (O'Regan, 2001, p. 8).

Some of the films that explore the Australian and Aboriginal lifestyle include *Jedda* (Charles Chauvel, 1955), *Walkabout* (Nicolas Roeg, 1971), *Blackfellas* (James Ricketson, 1993), *Australian Rules* (Paul Goldman, 2002) and *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005). Films such as *The Last Wave* (Peter Weir, 1977), *Dead Heart* (Nick Parsons, 1996) and *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002) look more at the symbolic and mystical culture of Aboriginality. Some films that examine the politics of Aboriginality include *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978), *The Fringe Dwellers* (Bruce Beresford, 1985), *Yolgnu Boy* (Stephen Johnson, 2001), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002) and *Black & White* (Craig Lahiff, 2002). And finally, there have been Aboriginal films for Australian cinema that have recently been released that have been directed by Aboriginal filmmakers – *Radiance* (Rachel Perkins, 1998), *One Night*

the Moon (Rachel Perkins, 2001) and *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002), which look at a number of the issues mentioned above.

Representing Aboriginality in film is problematic and the casting of Aboriginal people in the stereotypical roles has significantly influenced the representations of Aboriginality in Australia, an influence which continues today. However, a shift in the discursive formation of Aboriginality is occurring, and this thesis will argue that representations of Aboriginality in Australian cinema are now becoming increasingly decolonised. A new body of knowledge, such as Langton's book, has contributed to an anti-colonial discourse from which a different sort of representation can be derived. Within this body of knowledge, there have been a number of Australian feature films that have embraced an anti-colonial perspective of Aboriginality, and others that continue to use the colonial theme which links and conflates Aboriginality and landscape, but which nevertheless adopt an anti-colonial perspective.

It is important, however, to remember that Aboriginality cannot fit into any single or satisfactory definition (Gardiner-Garden, 2003, p. 16). Langton explains that this term developed from the "subjective experience of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue....Before [settlement], there was no "Aboriginality" in the sense that is meant today" (Langton, 1993, pp. 31-32). Aboriginality is a construct which arose from colonisation and the racist stereotypes and mythologies were created by colonists (Langton, 1993, p. 33). By decolonising mythologies and representations of Aboriginality in Australian cinema, Aboriginal people will continue the process of self-determination and ensure the continuity of their languages, cultures and representation of their views (Leigh, 1988, p. 88). This is and will continue to be done by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal filmmakers.

To support the argument that representations of Aboriginality in Australian Cinema are becoming increasingly decolonised, this thesis will analyse two themes from the list of films previously mentioned. Firstly, it will undertake a comparison of representations of the characters played by David Gulpilil, who has featured in *Walkabout*, *The Last Wave*, *Dead Heart*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *The Tracker* and *The Proposition*. In all these films (with the exception of *The Proposition*), Gulpilil is generally portrayed as a nomadic Aboriginal with mystical Indigenous tracking abilities. However, in the time between his first film, *Walkabout* in 1971, and *The Proposition* in

2005, there has been a significant shift in the way Gulpilil is cast and how his character is represented. His character representation has shifted from expressing a dehumanised discourse of Aboriginality, to one in which the Aboriginal character possesses human qualities, and is capable of creating intelligent and informed decisions. Katrina Strickland talks generally about the change in the representations of Aboriginal characters since *Walkabout*, *Jedda*, and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*:

More recent titles with historical settings, such as Rolf de Heer's *The Tracker* (2002) and Phillip Noyce's *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), have put their indigenous characters squarely in the foreground. Films such as Rachel Perkins's *Radiance* (1998), Paul Goldman's *Australian Rules* (2002) and Ivan Sen's *Beneath Clouds* (2002) have dealt with complex issues faced by modern individuals, their families and communities (Strickland, 2005a).

Secondly, the thesis will analyse three films directed by Aboriginal filmmakers that place the emphasis on Aboriginal characters as individual in complex times, rather than a stereotyped figure in an Australia landscape. These three films are Rachel Perkin's *Radiance* (1998) and *One Night the Moon* (2001); and Ivan Sen's *Beneath Clouds* (2002). These three films all embrace an anti-colonial approach. Jane Mills (n.d.) believes that "Aboriginal filmmaking is poised to challenge dominant, whitefella filmmaking...challeng[ing] many preconceptions about Indigenous cinema". Also, in Sen's films, the "characters all challenge colonialist representation by providing white Australia with a black history" (Mills, n.d.). These two topics will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

The films to be discussed cover the period from the 1970s until today, and reflect and run parallel with the many political and social movements that occurred in Australia. These movements have engendered a new discursive formation of Aboriginality in Australia, which are increasingly being reflected in Australian cinema. By exploring these films and contributing to the body of knowledge about Aboriginality/Indigeneity in Australian cinema, a wider understanding of Aboriginal art, literature and the aesthetic and cultural values of Aboriginal film and video production will continue to be developed. This thesis argues that stereotyped, negative and post-colonial representations of Aboriginality are being dissipated. There is a continuing body of work with an anti-colonial approach and discourse, as opposed to post-colonial, being adopted in terms of representations of Aboriginality in Australian cinema. Representations of Aboriginality can and will continue to be decolonised.

CHAPTER 2

ABORIGINALITY FROM A POST-COLONIAL TO AN ANTI-COLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

How we are seen determines in part how we are treated, how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation (Dyer, 2002, p. 1).

This chapter examines how important the fundamental right to represent yourself is and how it has been important in the development of Aboriginality (Smith, 2001, pp. 150-151). Representing yourself challenges the representations that are imposed upon you by others. Challenging past representations and developing your own takes time and these changes will continue to shift over time. Shifting representations of Aboriginality are no exception. Representation, as defined by Graeme Turner, is the social process of making images, sounds and signs, stand for something (Turner, 1999, p. 40). Towards the end of the 20th century, Aboriginal people have had a greater opportunity “to represent ourselves”. Self-representation of Aboriginality has become enunciated in a shared voice and expression created by “Indigenous artists, writers, poets, filmmakers and others who attempt to express an Indigenous spirit, experience or world view” (Smith, 2001). There has been a significant shift towards Aboriginal Australians representing ourselves from within an anti-colonial perspective.

Shifting representations in Aboriginal Australia have evolved from events such as the political and social movements discussed in Chapter 1, but also from academic and literary contributions towards the understanding of Aboriginality. However, Aboriginality is highly problematic in its definition, as it is a term that developed from colonisation. Initially the term “Aboriginality” was shaped by colonial and racist discourses, as it was derived from early relationships with the colonisers (Banerjee, 2000, pp. 8-9). There are also now many different and contested definitions of Aboriginality from both colonial and post-colonial readings. These perspectives are problematic too for Indigenous researchers as they are still derived from colonialism. To critically explore how Aboriginal people are represented in Australian cinema, this study will argue that Aboriginal films are now being made with an anti-colonial

approach – a strategy which attempts to challenge racist representations of Indigenous Australia (Johnson, 1993) – as opposed to a post-colonial approach. An analysis will be made of films that have taken a post-colonialist approach, which will be compared to recent films that are emanating an anti-colonial approach. This chapter will explore Aboriginality from both a post-colonial and an anti-colonial perspective before an analysis is undertaken in Chapters 3 and 4.

The theory of post-colonialism is highly problematic, especially from an Aboriginal research perspective, as explained in Banerjee's article *Whose land is it anyway?... (2000)*. The term "post" implies that something has passed and thus post-colonialism means that "colonialism as a historical reality has some how ended" (Banerjee, 2000, p. 5). However, colonialism has not ended and the term post-colonialism did not discriminate adequately between *different experiences* of colonialism (McLeod, 2000, p. 240). Post-colonialism has been actively reproduced within contemporary dynamics of colonial power (Anderson, 2003, p. 24). In a "post-colonial" country, Aboriginal people are still considered the Other and are consistently denied their rights that were imposed by the colonialists (Banerjee, 2000, p. 5). An anti-colonial approach to filmmaking challenges the epistemological basis of Aboriginality to counter the hegemonic work of colonialism (Smith, 2005) as will be shown in Chapter 4 when exploring films directed by Aboriginal filmmakers.

Post-colonial definitions of Aboriginality from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933 and 1989) define Aboriginality as "the quality of being aboriginal" (cited in Kleinert & Neale, 2000a, p. 518). This definition condenses a great deal of complex information, incorporating a host of connotations and making the definition almost archaic. Dyer argues that defining Aboriginality in these terms fits into Walter Lippman's definition of "stereotyping" (Dyer, 2002, p. 12). Stereotyping constitutes an oversimplified standard image or idea held by one person or group of another (*MSN Encarta*, 2005). Stereotypes are often one-sided characterisations given by one group from a particular and privileged position, and evaluatively places, and attempts to fix in place, other people or cultures (Pickering, 2001, p. 47). Stereotypes of Aboriginal people have been used in a negative way to represent Aboriginals and O'Shaughnessy (1999) suggests that this negative representation "justifies white violence as a defence against savagery...[and is] thus very useful in justifying white oppression of indigenous populations" (O'Shaughnessy, 1999, p. 230). Characterisations of Aboriginals in film

are usually built on stereotyped notions and not on the personal experiences of individuals (Hutton, 1985, p. 334). The experience of individuals is subsumed by the stereotype. Stereotyping of Aboriginal people has played a major role in “justifying and validating the violence of colonialism and these [stereotypes] continue to operate in critical ways” (Casey, 2003). Stereotypes have significantly added negatively to the discourses of Aboriginality that exist today.

Interpreting the way images are produced affects the consumption and interpretation of the meaning of images. Also known as social constructionism, this is a theoretical concept introduced by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their 1966 book *The Social Construction of Reality*. Social construction – as it operates in film – has a remarkable influence on the way audiences perceive reality (*Social constructionism*, n.d.). This perception of reality is important when exploring representations, especially when it is perceived as “knowing” about the people represented. Langton (1993) talks about the power of the media and Australian audiences’ understanding of Aboriginal people and how, from the media, Australians “know” about Aboriginal people. The Aborigines that Australians “know” are, for example, Jedda and Marbuk in Chauvel’s 1955 film *Jedda*, or Neville in Peter Faiman’s 1986 film *Crocodile Dundee*. But these fictional characters are figures of imagination generated by Australian image producers (Langton, 1993, p. 33) engaged in the practice of social constructions.

How characters are represented in film is also part of these cinematic forms and practices, which can reproduce stereotypes and, ultimately, racism. But as Moore and Muecke discuss, there is also an “ubiquitous racist framework that may entrap even directors and producers who consider themselves radical or “liberated”” (Moore & Muecke, 1984, p. 38). The framework in which most directors and producers work draws upon their accumulated, or “extratextual”, knowledges of the world and therefore reflects some of the stereotypical notions that exist (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994, p. 3). Interacting with this extratextual knowledge may exploit the existing stereotypical framework and influence the viewer’s interpretation of what is on the screen (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994, p. 35). What the audience has seen on the screen conflates discourse(s) that already exist.

Another example of conflating stereotypes is the use of zoological terms to describe Indigenous people, which Memmi (cited in Smith, 2001, p. 8) says is “one form of dehumanisation”. Michael Leigh (1988) refers to a press statement made about the Aboriginal actor Robert Tudawali’s performance in *Jedda* (Charles Chauvel, 1955), which refers to his “sheer *animal* magnificence” (Leigh, 1988, p. 85, italics added). Aboriginal actors are often stereotyped when being cast – the nomadic Aboriginal was often seen standing on “one-leg as the sun sets, blood-red, on the forbidding land”; or they were “cast as buffoons or lazy and shiftless sub-hominids....filled with either lust or vague mystical forebodings” (Leigh, 1988, pp. 79-83). The stereotypical images that have been created are based on the notions of differences and otherness (Kurtzer, 2003, p. 184); and the difference between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals were “determined by the categories of colonialism” such as politics, race, religion, ethnicity and gender (Muecke, 1992, p. 29). These categories helped shape the negativity that non-Aboriginal people felt towards Aboriginal people.

Kurtzer (2003) sees that the differences between the two cultures became a way to justify controlling the Other, and Aboriginal Australia became subject to policies such as segregation, assimilation and forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families (p. 184), based on these differences. Development of these and others policies by colonists was a means to control and to disavow the racial, cultural and historical differences of the Other (Homi Bhabha cited in Kurtzer, 2003, p.184). The concept of the Other collectively groups someone or some cultures to reinforce powerful social myths as a process of social exorcism, and places the Other at the periphery (Pickering, 2001, pp. 47-49). This thesis defines the Other as constituted with a name, a face, a particular identity, namely Indigenous peoples (Smith, 2001, p. 2). In Australia, Aboriginal people are seen and commonly referred to in narratives as the Other.

For Aboriginal people to shift away from being represented as the Other, various institutions and people have been challenging hegemonic constructions of representations. The ensuing discourses are the result of Aboriginal people representing themselves in areas such as acting, filmmaking, performing, academia and literature. Aboriginal people are present in many institutions and industries and continue to challenge and decolonise stereotyped representations of Aboriginality from the past. Through self-representations, Aboriginal people continue to add to the “new ways of knowing” about Aboriginality. Self-representation is about Aboriginal people

representing themselves by “countering the dominant society’s image of Indigenous peoples, their lifestyles and belief systems” (Smith, 2001, p. 151). Self-representation also breaks down and decolonises stereotypes of Aboriginality. For example, Aboriginality in the past has been defined in relation to racial characteristics, such as skin colour, to distinguish between “real” Aborigines and the rest (Reynolds, 1996, pp. 179-180). However, recent definitions include that an Aboriginal is someone “who is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia, identifies as an Aboriginal and is accepted by the Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal” (Gardiner-Garden, 2003, p. 1). One outcome of this definition is that a person who identifies as an Aboriginal person, but who may not have stereotypical racial characteristics, is Aboriginal. Hence, there is a new form of representation of Aboriginality being seen in Australia, and especially in Australian cinema. Many more people identify as Aboriginal, based on the new definition, an issue that will be explored further in Chapter 4 in an analysis of Ivan Sen’s *Beneath Clouds*. A culturally sensitive reconstruction of Aboriginality is central to the process of decolonisation (Muecke, 1992, p. 11); and self-representation has equally been a major factor in Aboriginal resistance and survival.

The development of an Aboriginal Programs Unit (APU) in the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) in 1987 made an important contribution to the process of self-representing, or self-determination, by “increasing the televisual representation of Aboriginal people throughout Australia” (Ginsburg, 1993, p. 92). There was the necessity for Aboriginal people to be represented in all areas of the television industry. The ABC recognised:

...a special need exists for the Aboriginal people to develop their own cultural identity in order to redress the special disadvantages they have suffered. Accordingly, the ABC will encourage community awareness of the Aboriginal people’s aspiration in its programs, and it affirms its commitment to provide television and radio programs made by Aboriginal people themselves (ABC cited in Ginsburg, 1993, p. 93).

However, in today’s terms this statement is patronising at it places Aboriginal people as the Other by talking about Aboriginal people in the third person. The generalisation of Aboriginality in this statement is evidence of the limited discourses available at the time this statement was made (Muecke, 1992, p. 23). Even so, the APU began building alliances and engaged in the “creation of media images of themselves that alter their place in the world of representations” (Ginsburg, 1993, p. 96). The self-representation of Aboriginal people was contributing to shifts in representations.

During the same period, the Australian Film Commission (AFC) also recognised the need for Aboriginal people to represent themselves. The AFC approached Professor Marcia Langton to write an essay on the “politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things” (Langton, 1993, cover). In this seminal text, Langton argued there was “no sizable body of literature which provides an informed, anti-colonial critique of films and videos *about* Aboriginal people”. Aboriginality also comes from a body of knowledge on representation (Langton, 1993, p. 24). She argues that the body of knowledge that exists around representations of Aboriginality draws upon a colonial and post-colonial perspective. Therefore, there is a need to develop an anti-colonial body of knowledge about Aboriginality.

An article by Karen Jennings and David Hollinsworth (1993), rebuts Langton’s claim and points instead to the work of “Graeme Turner, Kevin Brown, Stephen Muecke, Catriona Moore, Bob Hodge, Vijay Mishra, Tim Rose, Heather Goodall, et al., and Colin Johnson and Stuart Cunningham”, not to mention themselves (Jennings & Hollinsworth, 1993, p. 57). However, Langton is suggesting that the body of research and critical theory surrounding colonial representation, compared to the body of knowledge of representations of Aboriginal people, especially in the Australian film and television industry, is practically “invisible” (Langton, 1993, p. 24). This lack is seen as a form of racism and it is a problem that comes from history. It represents the density of racism and how Aboriginal people have been subjected to distorted representations of themselves. The term “Invisibility” becomes a metaphor for the absence of self-representation of Aboriginal people (Langton, 1993, p. 24). By developing a body of knowledge, Aboriginal people would become more visible.

The objective of Langton’s essay was not only to raise awareness of the lack of a body of knowledge surrounding representations of Aboriginal people and their concerns, but also to address protocols and guidelines for developing Aboriginal films. Without appropriate guidelines, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists would continue to find it difficult “to say and do what they would like to say and do” (Langton, 1993, pp. 7-8). Her essay contributed greatly to developing a body of knowledge about how Aboriginal people seek to be represented, and encouraged the AFC to continue with funding for Aboriginal filmmaking (Langton, 2005). In 1993 an Indigenous Branch of the AFC was established and Indigenous programs improved greatly.

The AFC Indigenous Branch supported and encouraged self-representation of Indigenous Australians in the film and television industry. Protocols and guidelines for working with Indigenous content and communities were developed, and the AFC states that from 1993 to 2003:

...the Indigenous Unit has invested in 129 projects. The Unit has invested just under \$1.2 million on development and just over \$5 million on production. Sixty Indigenous directors have been supported, along with 12 Indigenous producers. Sixty two travel grants have been awarded totalling nearly \$200,000 and 22 attachments have been funded at a cost of just over \$70,000 (*The Indigenous branch: Australian Film Commission*, 2003).

Some of the productions that received support from the AFC include *Radiance* (Rachel Perkins, 1998), *Confessions of a Headhunter* (Sally Riley, 2000), *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001), *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002) and *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002). During this period, there was a significant increase in media productions by and about Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people now had a greater opportunity to decolonise and re-present Aboriginality in the film and television industry through self-representation. Langton reaffirms this in her essay by saying that “without a body of self-representative work there can be no self critical assessment made and no meaningful discourse on Aboriginal aesthetics by Aborigines themselves” (Langton, 1993, p. 85). A body of self-representative work has grown, contributing to a meaningful discourse of Aboriginality, particularly by Aboriginal people. In exploration of films pre- and post- the development of programs such as the APU and Indigenous Branch of the AFC, shifts in representations of Aboriginality can be made evident. Employing Aboriginal people in the film and television industry has had a significant effect on the shifting constructions of Aboriginality. Reference has been made to other social institutions and policies of the time, and it is important to acknowledge that these representations have influenced the images and discourses surrounding Aboriginality.

Muecke (1992) identifies three discourses in which Aboriginality is constructed – the anthropological, the romantic and the racist; however, it is noted that Aboriginality is not limited to these. All three discourses articulate perceptions of difference (p. 24). The translation of difference into Otherness denies dialogue and interaction with the subject being represented (Pickering, 2001, p. 49). However, through decolonisation and self-representation, the discourses that Muecke identified are losing “truth value”.

The shift occurring in representations of Aboriginality decreases the truth of the statements in the abovementioned discourses. These statements only hold value in the knowledge-making process (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2003, p. 290) and decolonisation is challenging the process of knowledge-making by and about Aboriginal people and Aboriginality. To challenge these processes is to take an anti-colonialist approach and to decolonise representations of Aboriginality. Smith explains the importance of this:

It involves the unmasking and deconstruction of imperialism, and its aspect of colonialism, in its old and new formations alongside a search for sovereignty; for reclamation of knowledge, language, and culture; and for the social transformation of the colonial relations between the native and the settler.

Decolonization [needs] a positive and more inclusive social vision and [needs] more tools for development and self-determination (as an alternative to violent campaigns of resistance). Research, like schooling, once the tool of colonization and oppression, is very gradually coming to be seen as a potential means to reclaim languages, histories, and knowledge, to find solutions to the negative impacts of colonialism and to give voice to an alternative way of knowing and of being (Smith, 2005).

In conclusion, by attempting to track the process of shifting representations of Aboriginality in Australian cinema, from a post-colonial to an anti-colonial perspective, this study will add to the body of knowledge and hopefully contribute to an alternative way of knowing about Aboriginality and of being Aboriginal.

CHAPTER 3

SHIFTING REPRESENTATIONS OF ABORIGINALITY IN THE FILMS OF DAVID GULPILIL

Knowledge of the Aborigine was constructed based on descriptions of totemic rites, rituals, kinship patterns, and other formulations that are characteristic of the tribe of European anthropologists (Banerjee, 2000, p. 7).

To demonstrate how representations of Aboriginality in Australian cinema have shifted, this chapter will track the characters played by the Indigenous actor David Gulpilil. Gulpilil is from the Mandalpingu tribal group in north-eastern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory and began acting in the 1970s when he was chosen to act in Nicolas Roeg's *Walkabout* (1971). He has since appeared in many movies; however this chapter will explore the character representations played by Gulpilil in *Walkabout* (Nicolas Roeg, 1971), *The Last Wave* (Peter Weir, 1977), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002) and *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002). In these four roles, Gulpilil plays characters that have influenced audiences' perception of Aboriginality in Australia. Gulpilil has been an archetype for representations of Aboriginality in Australia in that he symbolises collective experiences of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal people. His characters have seemed to represent the stereotypes of Aboriginal people in popular discourses surrounding Aboriginality at the particular time each film had been made. This chapter will argue that there is a shift in the characters that Gulpilil has played, from a perception defined by post-colonialism to one informed by an anti-colonial perspective. Gulpilil's latest movie, *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005), will also be briefly discussed and it will be argued that this film is part of a different emerging discourse surrounding representations of Aboriginality, which has also stemmed from an anti-colonialist approach.

Post-colonialism refers to the social, political, economic and cultural practices which arise in response and resistance to colonialism (*Postcolonialism, nation and gender*, n.d.). O'Shaughnessy (1999) describes post-colonialism as an attitude that hopes and presumes that all people in a colonial country now have equality. Also, in a post-colonial country, the old colonial power bases no longer exist (O'Shaughnessy,

1999, p. 252). The theory of post-colonialism is said to have developed in the 1970s emerging from Edward Said's work on "Orientalism". By taking these definitions, attitudes and the historical context into mind, it is possible to see how the narratives of *Walkabout* and *The Last Wave* were developed in a post-colonial framework that existed at the time, but were also highly problematic as neither film showed Aboriginal people as equal to non-Aboriginal people. These films confirm Susan Sheridan's thesis in her 1988 book that "Australian culture is still colonial" (Sheridan, 1988, p. 76).

An article written by Kevin Brown (1988) analysed patterns of representations in relationships between Europeans and Aboriginals in fifteen Australian feature films produced between 1955 and 1984. The intention was to provide a framework from which to develop an "analysis of the construction of the category of 'race'" (p. 475). In order to achieve this, Brown developed a "racial register" that he used to show the nature of the Indigenous/Settler relationships by identifying three recurring themes – the Aboriginal Defeat, the Individual Journey and the Return Journey (p. 477). These themes reflect the discourses available at the time the films were made, and were significant in the construction and representation of race. Brown concluded that a shift in filmic representations occurred during this period; however, essential differences between Europeans and Aboriginals still remained evident in the construction of race (Brown, 1988, pp. 493-494). Constructing essential differences between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals kept Aboriginal people "in the bush – somewhere 'out there'" (p. 488) and kept them as the Other. Brown's concept of the racial register will be useful in examining *Walkabout* and *The Last Wave* and in helping to identify how Gulpilil's characters were represented. Brown describes the racial register as:

...the first (Aboriginal Defeat) suggests that Aboriginal people cannot live successfully in European society. The second (Individual Journey) suggests that some intelligent Europeans can appreciate Aboriginal culture and move towards it, while the third (Return Journey) suggests that Europeans in the bush are out of place but may learn to live in it with the help of Aborigines. They may also move back to European society...the films privilege European movement of place, that is, Europeans can become more like Aborigines (on an individual basis), but Aborigines cannot become more like Europeans or be successful in contact with European society (Brown, 1988, pp. 486-487).

By using the representations of Gulpilil's earlier characters and comparing them to his characters in three of his later films, this chapter will be able to show a shift in representation of Gulpilil's characters, which may indicate a shift in discourses surrounding Aboriginality.

In *Walkabout*, Gulpilil plays an Aboriginal boy who is on walkabout in the desert, which is part of his rite of passage into manhood. The Aboriginal boy helps out two English children, a teenage girl and a young boy, who are lost in the desert. Even though they cannot speak each other's language, communication (and ultimately the children's return to civilisation) is achieved through interactions with each other. When his character first appears on the screen, Gulpilil emerges mystically from the landscape – “as organically linked to the landscape he inhabits, prancing sensuously and athletically as he hunts for goanna” (Simmons, 2002). He is wearing only a lap-lap and carrying a spear. Tied to his lap-lap are dead goannas he has already caught. The two children run up to him and start asking for water, but he does not understand English. The girl is frustrated and perplexed that he cannot understand her simple English. Her younger brother realises that he doesn't understand and uses a form of sign language to communicate to him that they are thirsty. The Aboriginal boy then understands and laughs. He laughs because the children don't know the simple survival skill of getting water.

Walkabout falls into Brown's theme of the Return Journey, with the English children learning to survive in the bush with the help of the Aboriginal boy. However, the English boy takes elements of the Individual journey and mimics the actions of the Aboriginal boy by not wearing a shirt; by being involved in body and rock painting; and by hunting and gathering to collect firewood. The binary relationship of the Aboriginal boy with the English children also has elements of an individual journey; however, the Aboriginal boy seems to assimilate some of the children's English ways, but not for survival reasons. Early in the film, he is oblivious to the fact that the lap-lap he is wearing exposes his bum. This exposure makes the girl feel uncomfortable and later we see the Aboriginal boy with a school blazer tied around his waist to cover him. He has assimilated the English way of covering up and appeases the English girls discomfort towards nudity. Another example is towards the end of the film when the Aboriginal boy communicates with the girl in English by saying “water”. The story suggests that he is sexually attracted to the girl, and to win her affections he has tried to adapt to her way of doing things. However, his advances (in the form of a dance) are rejected and, as part of the racial register discussed earlier, the Aboriginal boy cannot become like the English girl or be successful in contact with her, so Gulpilil's character dies by taking his own life. Also, his advances threaten miscegenation – sexual mixing of races – and

this is a taboo in filmic narrative (O'Shaughnessy, 1999, pp. 229-230). Even though the English children are out of place in the bush and only learn to live in it with the help of the Aboriginal boy, they are able to move back to their civilised life and survive. However, through the interactions that Gulpilil's character had with the white characters, his character suffers the ultimate consequence and dies. *Walkabout* reinforces the myth that the Anglo-Saxon is infinitely adaptable and can survive in both locales, and that the interactions of the Aboriginal with European society are ultimately a death sentence.

In *The Last Wave*, Gulpilil plays the character of Chris Lee, one of five urban Aboriginals who have been accused of the murder of another Aboriginal man. It is stated throughout the film that urban (or city dwelling) Aboriginals cannot be tribal and should be judged under white law. Only the "real" Aboriginals from the bush can be judged under tribal law. However, there are obvious strong links between the Aboriginal characters in the film and tribal Aboriginal traditions. Lee (Gulpilil) mainly interacts with the main character of the film – a white Australian lawyer, David Burton (played by Richard Chamberlain), who is representing Lee and the others in the murder trial. Their interaction is intensified by Burton's personal links to Aboriginal mysteries seen in his dreams and premonitions (Malone, 1988, p. 100). Lee acts as a go-between, linking Burton and his dreams and his understanding of Aboriginal traditions. For most of the film, Lee does not admit to his tribal links for fear of revealing tribal secrets (Magill, 1995). However, towards the end of the film, Lee reveals these secrets to Burton, but at the cost of his life. Even though we don't see Lee die, his death is implied in the narrative.

In both of these films, Gulpilil's character dies. These films reinforce the discourses surrounding Aboriginality at that time, especially that Aboriginal people were a "dying race and that they were morally and biological inferior to whites" (McConnochie cited in Jennings, 1993, p.33). Carl Jung would argue that the white filmmakers of this time, as the dominant group, repressed the minority, the Aboriginals, by killing them off (O'Shaughnessy, 1999, p. 151). Killing off the Aboriginal characters in the films reinforced the ideas of colonialism; hence, while it can be argued that these films were made in a post-colonial era, they did not give a post-colonial perspective. This is where post-colonialism became problematic for Indigenous people, as it was supposed to represent Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal equally. It is

understandable that Aboriginal people were not treated “equally” in films during this period, since there had only been four years between Aboriginal people being given the right to be counted as citizens in our *own* country in 1967, and *Walkabout* being made in 1971 (*Didj "u" know - Stories*, 2004, italics added). There had not been sufficient time for the effects of the treatment towards Aboriginals to have changed.

In 1967, a film was made called *Journey Out of Darkness*, directed by James Trainor, which reiterated the inequalities that existed. The Aboriginal characters were acted by Kamahl, a Sri-Lankan born actor, and Ed Devereaux, a white actor who was painted black – “a tradition of the silent films days of having white actors play the roles of Aborigines in blackface” (Malone, 1988, p. 26). The available discourses and inequalities made it difficult for Aboriginal people to act as themselves in a major role. When Aboriginal people were cast in Australian films, it was typically in supporting roles with their characters propelling the narratives of the films by helping the non-Aboriginal characters; hence Gulpilil’s casting in a supporting role in *Walkabout* and *The Last Wave*. Casting influences both the representation and the audience’s interpretation of Aboriginal characters (Moore & Muecke, 1984). Karen Jennings reaffirms this in her published research titled *Sites of Difference* (1993): she argues that “major Aboriginal characters in most Australian narratives, and their relegation to minor roles as sidekicks to white bushranging heroes or as exotic figures in a landscape,” added to the absence, or invisibility, of Aboriginal people in films (Jennings, 1993, p. 19). Aboriginal people need to be visible in films to change stereotyped and negative representations.

As discussed in Chapter 2, political and social movements throughout the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s significantly influenced representations of Aboriginality in Australia. Australia in general was being made more aware of issues affecting Aboriginal people. Some of these issues included land rights, Aboriginal deaths in custody and the forcible removal of Aboriginal children. The socio-political movements challenged the history, memory and identity of Australia and the everyday representations of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people were no longer being constructed as savages who were part of a dying race. There was also considerable work being conducted in the Australian film industry, which was significantly augmented by the work of Indigenous filmmakers, analysts and academics. The movements occurring in Australia (and the

Australian film industry) greatly influenced representations and discourses of Aboriginality. There was an increasing presence of Aboriginal people.

For example, Aboriginal people became actively involved in the film and television industry. McCarthy argues that the social and political movements throughout this period also had an effect on the beginning of the 21st Century, which was to produce a third wave of Australian cinema. Gulpilil was also involving himself in the film and television industry. He was learning about being behind the camera, as well in front of it: "It's good to learn about other parts of film, and to learn about the technology.... We have to keep telling Australian stories " (Gulpilil, cited in Strickland, 2005b). Gulpilil was mostly absent from the Australian cinema throughout the 1980s and '90s. His most memorable appearance during this period was in *Crocodile Dundee* in 1986. Gulpilil returned to the "third wave" of Australian Cinema with significant roles in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), *The Tracker* (2002) and more recently *The Proposition* (2005). Many things had changed in Australia's black and white relations over the intervening years. Australia seemed to experience a paradigm shift, both politically and culturally, in its historical consciousness (Collins & Davis, 2004, p. 3). Australian cinema was also developing new and different ways of telling stories about the original occupants of the country, and audiences were ready to receive them. This third wave confronted "how the history of injustice towards the indigenous peoples haunts the nation" (McCarthy, 2004, p. 2). This is evident in the next two films to be examined.

The first film to be discussed from this third wave of Australian films is *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. This is the story of three young Aboriginal girls who, because of their mixed race, are taken from their mothers and placed in an internment camp to be trained as domestic workers with the intention of "integrating" them into white society. The three girls escape from the camp and travel 1,500 miles north following the rabbit-proof fence, which would lead them back to their home. The story opened up a lot of "historical" wounds by "interspersing the story with other tales of colonial oppression, including rape and domestic servitude" (McCarthy, 2004, p. 7). The audience's empathetic reaction to these representations of the stolen generation, through the images of children, allowed the audience to develop an anti-colonialist understanding of the difficulties faced by Aborigines.

...it succeeds emotionally in the cause of what seems to be its primary aim, to advance an attitudinal change in Australians not normally sympathetic to the Aboriginal cause (Stratton, 2005).

As an article about *Rabbit-Proof Fence* from the Sun Herald states, Aboriginal people had embraced the opportunity to self-represent:

This shows life from an Aboriginal perspective, rather than from others looking in, so for a lot of Australians, it will be like going to another country. I think we're ready now to see this kind of film.... We're ready to learn about them, and move forward as a nation.... There is a groundswell at the moment in Australia in support of indigenous people and issues.... If they explore universal themes with an Aboriginal theme woven through subtly, they'll really work. People are very eager to find out more about Aboriginal people. (Williams, 2001)

This article is very patronising, and places Aboriginal people as the Other by talking about Aboriginal people in the third person. The use of "people are very eager to find out more..." refers to "white" people, so again Aboriginal people are excluded from the term. Also, Williams's reference to "subtly" exploring Aboriginality in films continues to place Aboriginal people to the periphery – where they can be seen, but not heard. However, Williams does reiterate the fact that films like *Rabbit-Proof Fence* reveal a different perspective through which non-Aboriginal people can see Aboriginality – his wording of the article is kept in a post-colonial perspective. Aboriginal people now had an anti-colonial voice in film, and this is pertinent to shifting representations. Australian audiences were beginning to experience Aboriginality in a new way, and Aboriginal people were involved as protagonists in the process.

Gulpilil plays the character of Moodoo – an Aboriginal tracker who recaptures the Aboriginal children who escape from the internment camp. Moodoo is following the three girls, and the oldest of the girls, Molly, employs a number of tactics to hide their tracks. Noting one of her tactics, Moodoo says admiringly: "She very clever this girl. She wants to go home" (cited in Gillespie, 2002). Through this dialogue, plus other filmic narrative techniques, audiences experienced the importance of family connections with Aboriginal people – a view that had not been widely articulated in film before (*Radiance* is an exception to this statement and will be discussed further in Chapter 4). The film also briefly looks at Moodoo's connection to his daughter, who has also been placed in the internment camp. Mr A.O. Neville (the Chief Protector of the Aborigines) acknowledges that Moodoo's probation period of serving for the government is up and that it would be Moodoo's desire to return home to the Kimberley. However, Moodoo is

torn between leaving his daughter behind and returning to his family. Neville is quick to establish that there is “no question of her going [too], she must remain at the camp and continue her training”. Neville recants his consent regarding allowing Moodoo to return home, and states that it would be best for all concerned that he stays at Moore River and that his probation be reviewed again in a year or so. This scene allows the audience to identify with the family connection between Moodoo and his daughter; and experience the few seconds in which he has to choose whether to return to his home and leave his daughter, or stay at the internment camp and work as a tracker for the white people. This portrayal of his character, and the difficult choice he has to confront, differs from the previous roles that Gulpilil had played.

Over the years, the characters that Gulpilil has played have shifted from being constructed as the Other, to characters that audiences could identify with. The change was in part to do with his celebrity status; but also because of shifting discourses surrounding what people knew about Aboriginality. The audience’s knowledge of Moodoo, and his developing admiration for Molly’s cleverness in avoiding recapture, is also developed through Gulpilil’s unscripted input into the narrative. Phillip Noyce talks with admiration about this in Darlene Johnson’s 2002 biographical documentary *Gulpilil: One Red Blood*:

Watching David demonstrate to me how a real tracker would operate was fairly interesting, because he revealed a knowledge of the landscape, of rocks, of every blade of grass. It’s almost as if [where] nature had been disturbed even minutely, then his acute radar could immediately pick it up. The first scene we were shooting with David and David came to the set, I explained to him the scene and I could see that he was perturbed by something. I asked him “what was the matter?” He said “Well, look. I can find these kids, I can find them anywhere”. I said “Look David, you can’t catch the kids, or otherwise we’ve got no story”. “Oh o’right, OK...it’s your film. Yes boss”. I could see that he was frustrated. I tried to demonstrate to him how they could avoid him, but he just wouldn’t accept that. But once again, he agreed, he acquiesced to my power. And then as we are shooting a scene where he’s looking down at what may be the children’s tracks, I suddenly realised what David was trying to tell me – *if you can’t catch them, then he doesn’t want to catch them*. And I just said on the spur of the moment “OK David, you know they’re there now” and Chris Doyle, the cinematographer, brought the camera up, about four seconds later arrived at David’s face and he broke into this incredibly subtle one thirtieth second of a smile. David was following his own script. What was being communicated to the camera of his internal process was something that even I couldn’t completely decipher until I cut the whole performance together (cited in Johnson, 2002).

This is further evidence of an Aboriginal actor taking control of his self-representation and drawing on his knowledge of being Aboriginal – a subjugated knowledge² or an anti-colonial knowledge. That is, Gulpilil's input into the movie was not drawn from a colonial knowledge. This was about his knowledge of being Aboriginal. His subjugated knowledge challenges the visible cultural assumptions seen in Australian cinema and showed that the white way, or Noyce's way in this case, is not necessarily the right way to represent Aboriginality (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p. 32).

Another shift in Gulpilil's character over the decades up to the third wave is that he is no longer there to propel the story of the white characters. Gulpilil is the protagonist of the narrative and his actions are in control of the mise-en-scene. Gulpilil is not positioned as part of a colonial narrative. He does not have to interact with the white characters through "mystical tribal powers" in order to help them survive. And, as part of the narrative, his character doesn't die after being in contact with non-Aboriginal people. In *Rabbit-Proof Fence* the audience never sees what ultimately happens to Moodoo, and this is no longer important for the narrative. The aim of the film is no longer to let the audience know that the Aboriginal "problem" had been taken care of one way or another. The representation of Moodoo's character and Indigenous culture is no longer constructed as anathema to the ongoing colonial system (Johnson, 2000, p. 104). The depth of Gulpilil's on-screen character appears to grow with his filmmakers' understandings of Aboriginal representations derived from new discourses and anti-colonial knowledges surrounding Aboriginality. This is also reflected in his next film – *The Tracker*.

In *The Tracker*, Gulpilil was cast as the lead – which was one of his ultimate goals (Faulkner, 2002). The story is set in 1922 and follows the journey of four men pursuing an Aboriginal man who has been accused of murdering a white woman. Initially, there isn't a question as to whether the Aboriginal man they are tracking is innocent or not – the colour of his skin renders him guilty. However, the film is the story of how the Tracker (Gulpilil) "assimilates black and white culture into the stream of his own consciousness....the black tracker helps bring white civilization into closer contact with Aboriginal culture" (Aoun, 2003). *The Tracker* explores two belief systems side-by-side by examining both colonisation and resistance (Wilson, 2002).

² In the study, subjugated knowledge refers to contesting dominant cultural views and embedded cultural assumptions (Semali, 1999, p.32).

With its rugged outdoor setting, *The Tracker* resembles a “Revisionist Western”, which breaks the rules of the Western genre. Thomas Caldwell (2005) describes this sub-genre as challenging earlier notions of Westerns, where the narrative involved the white men “taming” the frontier and bringing “civilisation” to the Indigenous people. *The Tracker* suggests that the “taming” of the frontier was really a violent and brutal act involving the slaughter of Indigenous Australians (Caldwell, 2005, p. 145) and that the real “taming” was done by the Indigenous protagonist (Gulpilil’s character) upon the brutal colonialist. Throughout the film, the struggle and shifts of the balance of power between the four men is almost a metaphor for the struggles between black and white histories of settlement in Australia. The focus is on the primal power struggle between men (Wilson, 2002) but also between cultures and values. None of the characters is named: instead, they are listed in the credits in a way that “designates them as archetypal elements” (Smaill, 2002, p. 30), representing the characters as a collective composite, instead of as an ensemble of individuals. Hence, Gulpilil is credited as “The Tracker” and represents assimilated Aboriginals who remain true to their Indigenous culture in the archetypal metaphor of the narrative.

The Tracker first appears in the movie walking in front of three white men, all of whom are on horseback carrying rifles. The Tracker is dressed in a police uniform and is an enigmatic figure helping the white law men (Gillard, 2004, p. 118). This image can also be seen as a representation of the assimilation of Aboriginal people. The Tracker conforms to the orders of the white men, especially the aggressive, Aborigine-murdering, leader of the group – aptly named “The Fanatic” (Gary Sweet). However, it soon becomes evident that the Tracker has ulterior motives in the decisions he is making while tracking an accused Aboriginal man. The Fanatic becomes suspicious and places the Tracker in chains, telling him how he will hang for his treacherous ways, to which Gulpilil’s character replies: “Poor black fella...he’s born for that noose. Hey?” The Tracker is aware of the path his life is deemed to take. The Tracker then tries to take control over the situation from the Fanatic by trying to drown him “accidentally”, but loses out on the challenge. Throughout the film, the Tracker opts to take more difficult routes and ones that will slow the group down and prevent them from catching the fugitive Aboriginal man. The white men are represented as generally believing in the Tracker’s mystical Indigenous abilities. One example is when the Tracker starts a song and dance, warning them about entering a particular area in the bush because it is sacred country. The white men seem to trust his knowledge. Little did they know that the

Tracker had realized they were getting too close to the hunted Aboriginal man and he needed to distract them.

However, there is a shift in the balance of power between two of the three white men. The Fanatic loses control of the group, which is taken over by “The Follower” (Damon Gameau). However, the chains are swapped from the Tracker to the Fanatic. The Follower has a certain amount of naivety to his character, and hence is not as aggressive as the Fanatic. The Tracker uses this shift of power and change in leader-characteristics to his advantage and after feeding the Follower a blend of poisoned berries, which sends him into a deep sleep, and he holds his own trial to sentence and hang the controlling Fanatic for his murderous treatment of Aboriginal people. The Follower is now the only surviving white person of the group and inadvertently becomes the follower of the Tracker and is taken into Aboriginal territory where they find the hunted Aboriginal man. The accused Aboriginal man is confirmed innocent of the white man's charges, but suffers tribal justice for breaking Aboriginal law with another crime. A shift in power happens again and the Follower relinquishes the Tracker of his duties and granted freedom. In the style of a Western, the Tracker rides off into the sunset, and “reclaims the whole country as his authority” (Gillard, 2004, p. 118).

It is the Tracker's story that is the arc of the narrative and the metaphor for black and white relations. Collins and Davis (2004) see this fable as a form of backtracking over Australia's colonial past, redressing a colonial and post-colonial history of the treatment of Aborigines (p. 173). *The Tracker* metaphorically represents black and white history, but also shows a futuristic and optimistic view of relations in Australia, if justice can be done to those who have grossly misused their power. Further, in this film, as noted above, Gulpilil's character does not die, which is evidence of the shift in discourses surrounding Aboriginality. His character “rides off into the sunset” and the surviving non-Aboriginal character returns to civilisation suggesting that colonial conflict lives on and subsequently that there may be an “unreconciled history between Aboriginal and settler Australians” (Collins & Davis, 2004, p. 94). This is a shift from previous films in which the fate of the Aboriginal characters was usually negative and often, ultimately, death.

Phillip Noyce (*Rabbit-Proof Fence*) and Rolf de Heer (*The Tracker*) both use these films to cinematically portray the psychological traumas imposed on Aboriginal Australia by interrogating “the ghosts of Australia’s colonial settler past and its post-colonial present” which have helped form the psyche of Australia (McCarthy, 2004). Both recent films portray the powerful alternative of Aboriginal survival. Compared to the impact of white settlement upon Indigenous society (represented in *Walkabout* and *The Last Wave*) as revisionist films, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Tracker* affirm that Aboriginal people survived colonial violence and oppression and challenge earlier representations of Aboriginal people as a doomed or dying race (Collins & Davis, 2004, p. 143). Even though McCarthy refers to *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Tracker* as part of the post-colonial present, both films offer an anti-colonialist approach to representations of Aboriginality in Australia. This approach is enabling a shift of representations of Aboriginality in Australian cinema.

In Gulpilil’s latest film, *The Proposition*, he is again cast as a tracker. However, this film approaches Aboriginality from a different perspective and the Aboriginal characters are neither the focus nor a motivating force behind the story of the white characters, but are simply part of the film. This is another shift from Gulpilil’s characters in *Walkabout* and *The Last Wave*, where, as discussed earlier, he was relegated to subservient or side-kick roles. In *The Proposition*, his role is secondary to the main characters, but not subservient. A review from the Sunday Morning Herald argues that *The Proposition* is not about “white on white or black, black on black or white – all are coloured red in *The Proposition*....The film is a sort of misanthropic history lesson.... [It] seeks to shake Australians out of complacency and ignorance of our own history, especially in relation to frontier violence” (Byrnes, 2005). This film focuses on frontier violence in settler Australia and leaves an opportunity for further research to explore the way this film looks at Australia’s history between settlers and the original inhabitants. Downing and Husband (2005) reiterate the necessity of further research in deconstructing colonial and post-colonial stereotypes:

The stereotyping of Indigenous peoples has been central to the construction of the legitimating ideology for their oppression...their claims to equity require a necessary complementary deconstruction of the supporting stereotypes. Claims for reparation are supported by detailed accounts of past, and recent, atrocities visited upon them by the dominant community (Downing & Husband, 2005, p. 124).

These are only a few examples of Indigenous and settler relationships, as represented in a limited selection of films, and this study acknowledges that exploring the concept of anti-colonialism has the potential to incorporate a wider range. However, the framework of an Honours thesis limits the scope of this study. Its purpose in this chapter is to compare the shifting representations of David Gulpilil from a colonial and/or post-colonial perspective, to an anti-colonial perspective. Through Gulpilil's deserved celebrity status in Australia, the shifting discourses surrounding representations of Aboriginality, and continuing work towards reconciliation and self-determination, Australian audiences are learning new ways of accommodating an anti-colonialist approach. This perspective will continue to develop through Aboriginal social, political and academic involvement, especially in the Australian film and television industry. Having considered a selection of Gulpilil's roles over the past three decades, Chapter 4 will look at three films made by Aboriginal directors and discuss how they represent Aboriginality. Involvement by Aboriginal people in this industry is an important factor in its development as it offers a chance to reappraise our historical acceptance of what audiences construed as "the facts" of white settlement. Australian film has had a huge influence within our society with regard to our understanding of Indigenous history and knowledge of Indigenous peoples and cultures.

CHAPTER 4

ANTI-COLONIALISM THROUGH ABORIGINAL FILMMAKING

Every act of representation involves a positioning of the self; each act of representation is an act of self-representation (John von Sturmer, 1989 / Langton p. 57).

Chapter 3 explored five movies starring David Gulpilil, and argued that the first two films had been made within a post-colonial perspective and that the last three films had adopted an anti-colonialist approach towards the narrative. An anti-colonialist approach tells Indigenous stories and reasserts the centrality of the Aboriginal experience, as opposed to colonial and post-colonial approaches. Notably, non-Aboriginal filmmakers have directed all the films discussed in Chapter 3. However, developing anti-colonial stories has to begin with self representations, hence to further explore anti-colonialism in film, this chapter will look at three films that have been directed by Aboriginal filmmakers – *Radiance* (Rachel Perkins, 1998), *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001) and *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002). This chapter will argue that the films develop further the anti-colonialist approach that is re-evaluating discourses surrounding Aboriginality.

Ferguson summarises the significance of recent Indigenous films by stating that:

The films are didactic and the subject matter in each case has been and is of crucial historical and political significance in the latter half of the twentieth century. The re-presentation of the protagonists in the films, of the historical contexts of which they were a part, and of the outcomes of their respective lives are therefore most significant (Ferguson, 1998, p. 108).

Radiance, *One Night the Moon* and *Beneath Clouds* are all re-presentations of Aboriginality. Each film explores and re-presents Aboriginality to the audience in a different way. The anti-colonialist approach in the three films to be examined reaffirms the process of self-determination where Aboriginal people take control to make their “own self-representation....to create culturally useful meaning” (Langton, 2003, p. 124). Self-representation by Aboriginal filmmakers in these three films allows the development of a meaningful discourse on and by Aboriginal people (ibid.). As stated by Marcia Langton “The majority of Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal

people. They relate to stories told by former colonists” (Langton, 1993, p. 33). Films about Aboriginal people made by Aboriginal people tell Aboriginal stories from Aboriginal perspectives that make the Aboriginal experience central to the narrative.

Radiance is the story of Mae, Cressy and Nona, who have reunited in their family home after spending many years apart to mourn the death of their mother. It soon becomes apparent that each woman has her own story and issues to deal with, but they are all united in the fact that they are family and that they belong together. *Radiance* is a journey of discovery about the past in order to move on – “the agonies of their past did not die with their mother but have rather become intrinsically interwoven into their perceptions of self” (Davin, 2000). The narrative cleverly and intrinsically interweaves the women’s past through the use of dialogue and props. It also deliberately avoids the use of flashbacks to represent the past, which will be discussed further shortly. Nona, the protagonist, propels the story through articulating her imagined romanticised world where one day her father – “the black prince” – will return for her and take her to a better life. Through her interactions with Mae and Cressy, it is revealed that Nona is in fact Cressy’s daughter and was conceived after Cressy was raped when she was only twelve years old by her mother’s boyfriend. Nona’s dream of the Black Prince soon disappears and Mae, Cressy and Nona reconcile their differences and unite as a family.

Radiance is identified as an Aboriginal film; however, many critics have much-admired the film for its ability to be a film about anyone and any race. Throughout the film there is no mention of the word “Aboriginal”, a deliberate approach employed by the three actresses (Turcotte, 2003, p. 38). Lander (cited in Donovan, 2002, p. 137) states that the characters are an “adaptable trio who could fit anywhere from a plantation house in Tennessee Williams to a two-up two-down terrace in the East Enders”. The characters are identified as Aboriginal through their looks and actions. In an interview, Rachel Perkins (2003), the director, discusses how many Aboriginal characters in film are generally caught in their background and often the stories cannot get to the essential nature of the character. She feels that Aboriginal characters in film are perceived as boring, as the characters are “weighted down by their social background” (ibid.). Perkins challenged this, and in *Radiance* the fact that the main characters in the film are Aboriginal is secondary to the narrative (Shane, 2002). *Radiance* does not deal with the characters’ Aboriginality directly as their cultural identity is not crucial to the plot

(Donovan, 2002, p. 137), and so the narrative is able to develop the characters' current and personal issues of everyday life. This has allowed audiences, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to identify with the characters instead of seeing them as the Other.

However, *Radiance* does communicate a subtle, but powerful, political message about Aboriginality, especially concerning the injustices inflicted upon Aboriginal women. Ceridwen Spark (2003) explains how "the film explores issues that continue to affect Indigenous people.... [and] the impact of dispossession and family separation on Aboriginal identity". By not focusing on the characters' Aboriginality, but still presenting issues that affect Aboriginal people in Australia in a subtle way, Perkins has taken an anti-colonialist approach to telling an Aboriginal story. While *Radiance* deliberately avoids the use of flashbacks to refer to a character's pasts, there is an intricate use of dialogue and props that subtly lets the audience know what has happened and that is part of the diegesis. By structuring the narrative this way, Perkins is still able to address issues that concern Aboriginal people in Australia, such as land rights, domestic violence, removal of children and reconciliation; however, the issues are addressed in a way that is non-confrontational for the audience and does not leave them in torment about past atrocities. An example of this is that, throughout the film, Nona (the protagonist) is determined that their mother's ashes be scattered on her ancestral "home" – a nearby island that is occasionally seen and referred to in the film, which has now been turned into a Japanese tourist resort. The island is depicted as "central to Mae, Cressy and Nona's sense of belonging" (Spark, 2003) and Nona's strong desire to spread her mother's ashes on the island is a reflection of the attachment that Aboriginal people feel to the land. Instead of using reenactments or heart-wrenching vision to show the mother's removal from the land (for example), a light-hearted approach is taken and Nona jokes "Hey, we should claim it"! This use of dialogue makes a joke of a common belief of non-Aboriginal people that all Aboriginal people want to assert land claims and allows the audience to laugh at the comment. Nona eventually goes to the island to scatter the ashes, which Gillard sees as symbolically making a claim to the land (Gillard, 2002), while Nona has also made her reconciliation with her mother and her ancestral home.

In contrast, the family home where most of the film is acted, represents the place where the family was sent to after losing their ancestral land. Nona, who is also pregnant, returns to the home with the intention of having her baby in the family home,

but soon learns that her family doesn't even own this. The house is owned by Harry, their mother's former lover. The audience never sees Harry, but it is implied that he is a "white....suburban middle class, working class guy" (Perkins cited in Simpson, 1999, p. 34). To Nona, the house represents a legacy of family that she wants to continue, but to Mae and Cressy it represents a prison where violence and oppression occurred. The island and the house can both be seen as "unique place[s] that Aboriginality occupies in contemporary debates about belonging and displacement" (Spark, 2003). In a response to the bad memories that the house holds, Mae and Cressy decide to burn the house down; like a burning of the past that is standing in the way of a reconciled future (Collins & Davis, 2004, p. 115). The film ends with the three girls uniting together as a family with a different perspective on the meaning of family and all in the "context of a revaluation of the nature and position of Indigenous people in a society dominated by non-indigenous people" (Gillard, 2002, p. 181). *Radiance* shows the importance of relationships within the family for Aboriginal people and reasserts the centrality of Aboriginality through anti-colonial storytelling. *Radiance* can almost be seen as a metaphor for reconciliation, in the way that it deals with these issues and how the three main characters reconcile with each other at the end of the film.

One Night the Moon, also directed by Rachel Perkins, takes an anti-colonialist approach in its theme. The film deals with the issue of a lost child and settlers' anxiety over land; however the audience is able to experience an Aboriginal perspective of racism and exclusion. The narrative takes "an anti-colonial message by re-telling a colonial story" (Langton, 2005). The film, based on a true story that occurred in 1932, is about a young girl who climbs out her bedroom window and disappears. Her parents are distraught and the father refuses the help of an Aboriginal tracker and policeman, Alex Riley, to look for their missing daughter. Instead, the father gathers other white men to search for her. The Aboriginal tracker watches as the search party heads in the wrong direction, and therefore never finds the child alive. Probyn and Simpson (2002) believe that the father's fear of taking help from the black tracker stems from the issue of land ownership, and the anxiety he experiences as a result of doubt cast over the father's/settler's rightful ownership of his property (Probyn & Simpson, 2002). The father metaphorically represents the settlers' perspectives on the colonial contest over land (ibid.) – a representation of the ongoing political struggle between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

One Night the Moon explores an important and recurring theme of Australian films, the story of the “lost child”. Early in the film, we see the white father (Paul Kelly) and his family on a sulky as they head to church. They overtake the Aboriginal tracker (Kelton Pell) and his family who are walking in the same direction. The white daughter smiles at the Aboriginal family, but her face is turned away by her mother so as not to interact with them, and to appease the anti-Aboriginal father. Palmer and Gillard (2002) believe that this interaction is a representation of the tension and ambivalence of non-Aboriginal Australians who are torn between innocence, curiosity and kindness (represented by the child) and animosity, anger and harshness (the father). The white woman (the mother) inhabits the place in-between, primarily supporting the position of the father (Palmer & Gillard, 2002). As a consequence of the white family’s reaction, the child becomes entranced into the landscape by the magic of the moon and is lost because of colonial ambivalence. Peter Pierce states that the theme of the “lost child” recurs primarily because it draws on the settler separation anxiety: lost from the mother country (Britain), deserted, stranded by her in this foreign, threatening, dry, arid, unwelcoming, hostile land” (Pierce cited in Probyn & Simpson, 2002). This theme, dramatised through the mother’s anguish for her missing daughter and the betrayal she felt from her husband, “reorients the peculiar sense of loss and belatedness associated with the lost child narrative”. Critics believe that this represents a direct correlation to the Stolen Generations³ (Collins & Davis, 2004, p. 143). Marcia Langton talks about the betrayal felt by the mother:

...in *One Night the Moon*, the mother’s view is very different from the hardened husband's view and his view is a hardened white settler’s view. But she wants anything to save her child’s life, whereas, so then very much at the end of the film, the overpowering message is not just the pointless, stupid, spiteful racism, but it's the sense of betrayal that the white settler mother feels that her child has died unnecessarily because of the stupid racism of her husband. The sense of her betrayal is very strong (Langton, 2005).

A continuing theme in Rachel Perkins’ work is the exploration of the tensions between colonizers and Indigenous people: “Our nation continues to struggle to resolve its relationship with Aboriginal People and the film reflects this struggle, but in these cases humanizes the issue through the sacrifice of a lost child” (John, 2005). Perkins uses *One Night the Moon* to show “the effects [and] impact of racism, that prevented people from being sensible.... it's the sense of betrayal that the white settlers mother

³ A term now synonymous with generations of Indigenous Australian children taken away from their families by governments, churches and welfare bodies to be brought up in institutions or fostered out to white families (Racism, no way! *The stolen generations*, 2005).

feels that her child has died unnecessarily because of the [foolish] racism of her husband” (Langton, 2005).

One Night the Moon also dispels another popular myth seen in cinema, that is the Aborigine being seen as either the savage, noble or otherwise, the faithful companion and/or the criminal who is with/against the valorous white hero of the outback, and other landscape and location stereotypes (Bryson, Burns, & Langton, 2000, p. 304). No-one is the hero in *One Night the Moon*. Instead, the film shows the division of cultures based on skin colour. It gives the audience an insight into the racism experienced by the tracker, which was detrimental to the child. It reinstates the exclusion that Aboriginal people have experienced throughout colonial history (Probyn & Simpson, 2002).

The third film to be explored as an anti-colonialist representation of Aboriginality is *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002). *Beneath Clouds* is the story of a fair-skinned Aboriginal girl named Lena (Danielle Hall) who leaves her malcontented life in an outback New South Wales town and heads to Sydney to find her Irish father, and hence a better life. Along the way she meets up with Vaughn (Damien Pitt), an Aboriginal boy who has just escaped from a prison farm in an attempt to see his dying mother and to reconcile with her. Lena is ambivalent about her Aboriginality and the film explores the pair’s differing interests, contrasting identities and the oscillation that occurs in the negotiation of their Aboriginality (Palmer & Gillard, 2004, p. 78). *Beneath Clouds* also allows audiences to experience an Aboriginal perspective; however it is a film that targets a younger generation of audiences, a generation which Marcia Langton (2002) believes is able to relate to Aboriginal people in a less troubled way because they are almost oblivious to Australia’s blinding colonial legacy of white supremacy and race hatred. However, Langton believes that this does not mean that the audience targeted for this film is necessarily less tolerant of the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people (cited in Collins & Davies, 2004, p. 163). They can, however, relate to issues of youth addressed in the film.

Beneath Clouds addresses an issue that is prevalent amongst many Aboriginal youths of today: being a child of a mixed marriage and therefore being of mixed descent. This can also be read as being a result of government assimilation policies. Lena has an Aboriginal mother and an Irish father, but has inherited many of the

characteristics of her father, from his white skin to his blue eyes. However, Lena is raised by her mother in a small wheat-belt town in New South Wales, which is predominantly an Aboriginal community. Lena leaves the town in the hope of developing a parental relationship with her father, which would lead her to cultural heritage change (Palmer & Gillard, 2004, p. 79). Many people of mixed-race feel as though they are constantly in a state of redefinition and exploration of themselves and their identity, being both an insider and an outsider (Bolatagici, 2004, p. 79). Lena's choice not to disclose her Aboriginality to Vaughn is a symptom of her desire to escape to a world that could mistake her for a white person (Walker, 2002, p. 14), allowing her to escape the "unsatisfying" life that has come with her Aboriginality.

As discussed at the beginning of Chapter 3, the concept of the Other – the role in which Aboriginals in film are commonly cast – collectively groups someone or some cultures to reinforce powerful social myths as a process of social exorcism, and places the Other at the periphery. *Beneath Clouds* doesn't position its characters as the Other, as it incorporates the characters' Aboriginality to identify with today's youths and their important function they play in shaping the formation of Australia identity (Palmer & Gillard, 2004, p. 76). An article written by Ian Anderson in 1997 examined issues of identity for Aboriginal people. He argues that breaking down stereotypes leads to a means of "lay[ing] bare intimate and sometimes personally painful aspects of our subjectivity to a potentially unsympathetic audience.... this risk is a necessary part of a strategy to reform the social and cultural processes that underlie the representation of Aboriginal people and issues" (Anderson, 1997, p. 2). *Beneath Clouds* is an example of a film directly addressing contemporary issues to challenge and reform the surrounding discourses about Aboriginality. *Beneath Clouds* shifts the characters from a perspective of being the Other – characters who are on the periphery – to characters who can be identified with, and related to, by the audience. The relationship of Lena and Vaughn serves as a metaphor for the necessity of Otherness to identity formation (Palmer & Gillard, 2004, p. 80). *Beneath Clouds* explores and embraces the cultural differences, which make Lena and Vaughn who they are. However, it also represents an insight into the experiences of Aboriginal youth in country towns. *Beneath Clouds* "emphasises the relevance of this to an understanding of Aboriginal youth culture: it also wants to help a broad audience imaginatively inhabit these situations and emotions" (Walsh, 2002).

The three films discussed in this chapter are all important elements in re-evaluating discourses surrounding Aboriginality, especially in being films about Aboriginality made by Aboriginal people. Downing & Husband reaffirm this by saying “It is critical in that a core element of self-determination is a capacity to construct and report your own reality” (Downing & Husband, 2005, p. 133). Self-representation is also critical in an industry that is powered by a non-Indigenous media which determines the audiences’ perceptions of Indigenous/Aboriginal people. This power within the media constitutes a “central plank of the hegemonic determination of Indigenous peoples’ worlds” (ibid.). Self-representation by Aboriginal filmmakers has allowed representations of Aboriginality to move away from an emphasis on the differences of “civilised” and “primitive” between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (ibid. p. 135). Representation of Aboriginal peoples by Aboriginal filmmakers is about “countering the dominant society’s image of [Aboriginal] peoples, their lifestyles and belief systems” (Smith, 2001, p. 151). An anti-colonial discourse can be present in films made by non-Indigenous people (as discussed in Chapter 3); however to fully develop an anti-colonial discourse, self-representation is needed first. It is an important and necessary approach to filmmaking, which in turn influences discourses of Aboriginality.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

We must continuously subvert the hegemony over our own representations, and allow our visions to create the world of meaning in which we relate to ourselves, to each other, and to non-Indigenous peoples (Dodson, 2003, p. 25).

Self-determination and self-representation are both important to a shifting discourse of Aboriginality. Self-determination and self-representation through Indigenous film and stories reassert the centrality of the Aboriginal experience, hence contributing to a body of work that can provide an anti-colonialist critique of films and videos *about* Aboriginal people. By providing an anti-colonialist body of work on Aboriginality, representations and re-presentations of Aboriginality are being developed and contributed to by Aboriginal people – a fundamental right of being able to represent ourselves (Smith, 2001, p. 150). However, it is not simply a case of films being colonialist or anti-colonialist, as Marcia Langton stated: “[with] all the human complicities that make it a much more ambiguous and complicated story ... it’s not just black and white. It’s not just colonial versus anti-colonial” (Langton, 2005). A project of anti-colonialism is about centering Aboriginal/Indigenous concerns, beliefs and world views from our own perspective (Smith, 2001, p. 39); however, telling stories from our own perspective and experience is framed by colonialism (ibid. p. 19). Understanding history is important for understanding the present, and reclaiming history is a critical and essential aspect of decolonising representations (ibid. p. 30). This allows a body of knowledge that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people/filmmakers can draw upon when representing Aboriginality. Smith (2001) sees a similar project occurring in Indigenous research where a collaboration of bicultural research is happening to address Indigenous people as being the researcher, instead of the researched (p. 18). In filmmaking, a similar collaboration of bicultural filmmaking is occurring and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal filmmakers are challenging racist representations of Aboriginality, and placing the Aboriginality experience central to the narrative, instead of as a homogenised, side-kick person melded into the landscape.

Representations of Aboriginal people in Australian cinema have long been dominated by non-Aboriginal filmmakers; however, this thesis has attempted to show shifting representations of Aboriginality by non-Aboriginal filmmakers from a post-colonial perspective, to a perspective where filmmakers are adopting an anti-colonial approach. The thesis then looked at three films directed by Aboriginal directors – Rachel Perkins and Ivan Sen – and argued that through self-representation, these films offer an anti-colonialist perspective of Aboriginality. Shifting representations of Aboriginality from colonial/post-colonial perspectives to an anti-colonialist one have to come from many different areas (such as politics, literature, academic studies etc); however re-presentations of Aboriginality by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal filmmakers in Australian cinema are contributing to creating a discourse that challenges and decolonises the stereotyped representations of Aboriginality.

Racist representations of any minority group through film need to be challenged and recent films seen in Australian cinema are making a significant contribution to this project. The challenge is allowing the formation of discourses that contribute towards “Aboriginal people [feeling] secure in public discussions about their own identity” (Anderson, 1997, p. 12). This then allows non-Aboriginal people in the media to acquire “specific relevant information about the history, cultural values, institutional systems and behaviour” about Aboriginal people (Downing & Husband, 2005, p. 189). Films like *Radiance* make significant points about “contemporary Aboriginal identity and belonging.... [and] remind audiences that Indigenous people continue to maintain their unique connections with this country and their families” (Spark, 2003). It is important for these films to acknowledge issues about the past, but to also be part of the process of reconciliation and moving forward.

The earlier films of David Gulpilil in which the Aboriginal actor appeared, discussed in Chapter 3, were a necessary part of the movement and development towards Aboriginal self-representation. Roeg and Weir pushed the boundaries of Aboriginal people being in films, both through representation and the narrative. This had a significant contribution to the representations we are seeing in films now. It is important to examine representations of Aboriginality in these earlier films and compare them to representations we are seeing now on screen, to discern how stereotypes of Aboriginality are shifting. When stereotypes are reinforced, especially in films, it is easy to believe them as the truth and representation is important as a concept because it

gives the impression of “the truth” (Smith, 2001, p. 35). Representation of race in any film/cinema has a vivid and powerful influence on social perception. Developing an understanding of the construction of Aboriginality plays an important part in challenging representations, as does Aboriginal filmmakers challenging dominant white definitions and media representations (Hickling-Hudson, 1990, p. 264).

This thesis has discussed three timelines that have occurred simultaneously – the political activities occurring in Indigenous Australia; the development of resources to encourage Indigenous filmmakers; and a trajectory of representations from colonial/post-colonial (stereotypical) to anti-colonial representations. An effect of the political movements from the 1970s through to today is that there has been a progressive movement towards Indigenous people to be able to construct their own representations and access to resources to be able to develop and produce Indigenous films (McDonald, 2002, p. 26). This is central to developing an anti-colonialist representation of Aboriginality in Australian cinema. As Langton (1993) states: “‘Aboriginality’ is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation” (p. 81). Aboriginality is continually being remade; however it is the ability of self-representation that is allowing creation of a new discourse surrounding Aboriginality that encapsulates the Aboriginal experience. Representing Aboriginality from our own perspective is important in the development and understanding of Aboriginal people – especially by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal filmmakers.

In Langton’s 1993 book, she states how “some Aboriginal filmmakers will not challenge colonialist representation because of the power of the visual realm to conceal social and political conditions” (p. 83); however, it is evident by the recent films seen in Australia cinema that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal filmmakers are challenging colonialist and media representations. Phillip Noyce and Rolf de Heer explore the legacy of colonialism (McCarthy, 2004, p. 27) by adopting anti-colonialist perspectives; and Aboriginal filmmakers like Rachel Perkins and Ivan Sen are in the forefront of self-representation. Darlene Johnson summaries the important of self-representation by stating:

There are many powerful stories that need to be revealed before any imbalances can redressed in this country....we have only just started to translate our histories onto the screen. The truth must be told before we can move on. Cinema can lead the way here. We've only just started (Johnson, 2000, p. 105).

There is still a long way to go towards reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia, but by Aboriginal people telling our stories in film and putting the Aboriginal experience central to the narrative through self-representation, a body of work will be developed that is both culturally meaningful and useful (Langton, 2003, p. 124). An anti-colonialist approach will contribute to a reacceptance of Australians historical past and knowledge about Aboriginal people and Aboriginality.

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